

CIVIL AFFAIRS IN EL SALVADOR, GRENADA, AND PANAMA

Becca S. Smith

EL SALVADOR

Description

Throughout the 1980s, the United States assisted the Salvadoran government in keeping the FMLN insurgency under control. The insurgency began in late 1979 after the failure of a reformist military coup to reduce the power of the oligarchy. Right-wing factions of the Christian Democratic Party and the military pushed moderates out of positions of power, including the original junta leader. The United States saw massive human rights abuses on the part of the regime and its allies, including the murders of a handful of U.S. citizens, but both the Carter and Reagan administrations sought above all to prevent a leftist takeover of yet another Central American nation. U.S. military and economic assistance (roughly \$6 billion over the course of the war) was designed both to win improvements in the Salvadoran government's human rights record and to prevent the insurgency from gaining control. The United States sent only a handful of military advisers: a kinetic operation was out of the question, particularly considering the unpopularity of the Salvadoran regime among Members of Congress. U.S. Civil Affairs personnel did not themselves carry out a civil-military mission in El Salvador; instead, the U.S. military advisory group comprised primarily of Special Forces troops¹ advised and trained the Salvadoran military to reach hearts and minds through civil defense and civic action campaigns. When the George H.W. Bush administration came to power in 1989, it promoted a negotiated settlement between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN.

Key Actors

BLUE: In addition to civilian personnel, the principal U.S. actors in El Salvador were members of the military advisory group (MilGroup),² limited by Congress to 55 advisors serving 1-year tours. These advisors were not permitted to accompany their Salvadoran counterparts into combat. The Reagan administration also deployed numerous 12-man Special Forces training teams throughout the country on 6- to 12-week tours.³

GREEN: U.S. allies in El Salvador were the Salvadoran government and military. The Honduran government temporarily provided training facilities for Salvadoran military personnel. The government of Panama, under the control of General Noriega from 1983 to 1989,⁴ was ironically a U.S. ally during this period. Salvadoran military personnel

¹ Civil Affairs forces were not officially considered Special Operations Forces until 1987.

² Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), 86.

³ Major Paul P. Cale, USA, "The United States Military Advisory Group in El Salvador, 1979-1992," *Small Wars Journal* (1996), 14-15, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/cale.pdf>.

⁴ Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 8.

were transported to United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in Panama City for training.

RED: U.S. opponents consisted of the Salvadoran opposition groups that became the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), aided by the U.S.S.R. and Cuba, which funneled arms to the FMLN via the Guatemalan insurgency, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, and other routes.

BROWN: The United States endorsed a regional peace framework achieved by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez in 1987, but the deal did not have an immediate effect on U.S. policy. The United Nations mediated between the warring parties from 1990 to early 1992, culminating in a peace agreement on January 16, 1992.⁵

Objectives & End States

The U.S. government's objectives in El Salvador were to prevent a communist takeover of the government, to help the Salvadoran government gain legitimacy with the population, to prevent the ruin of the Salvadoran economy, and to promote democratic institutions and human rights. The United States also sought to prevent an extreme right-wing coup, which would have made it even more difficult to maintain the support of Congress and the international community.⁶ Due to the post-Vietnam constraints placed on the U.S. military by the Congress, Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Bush focused on military, political, and economic assistance rather than kinetic operations. Congress provided substantial aid to El Salvador until the end of the Cold War, when reduced Soviet support of the FMLN seemed to obviate continued U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government. At this point, the United States supported a negotiated peace.

In the early years of the war (1981-1984), the objectives of the U.S. MilGroup were to help the Salvadoran military defeat the insurgency through training and arms, take the action and civil-defense programs.⁷ After the election of reformer José Napoleón Duarte in 1984, and the reduction of the insurgency through attrition, U.S. objectives remained the same but Salvadoran execution of the U.S.-backed strategy improved.

Operational Strategies/Key Missions and Tasks

U.S. military aid gave the Salvadoran military a steady supply of helicopters and other equipment and allowed it to vastly increase its numbers. American weapons and training made the Salvadoran military more than a match for the FMLN. Until the election of Duarte in 1984, the Salvadoran military was reluctant to follow American counterinsurgency advice, preferring to defend static positions and considering civic action and civil defense programs a "Gringo plan."⁸

Given the enormous task of professionalizing the Salvadoran military and the extremely limited numbers of U.S. military personnel permitted in country, the principal task of the MilGroup was to "train the trainer." In order to accomplish this, the MilGroup was

⁵ Thomas W. Walker, "Esquipulas II," *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations*, eds. Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

⁶ Byrne, 75.

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Ibid., 109.

populated by specialists from different components, many of them U.S. Army Rangers. According to a 1981 source, the MilGroup was comprised of the following:

- 6- MilGroup Staff at the U.S. Embassy (increased from 4)
- 5- Mobile Training Team (MTT) - working in the MilGroup, for administrative, logistics, and command purposes for the increased personnel.
- 6- Naval Training Team (NTT) - to assist the Salvadoran Navy in improving its capability to interdict seaborne infiltration of arms destined for the leftist guerrillas.
- 14- Helicopter training and maintenance personnel.
- 15- Small unit-training teams of five men each. To provide garrison training for the Salvadorans new quick-reaction force.
- 10- Two Operational and Planning Assistance Teams (OPAT) teams of five men each. To aid each of El Salvador's five regional commands in planning specific operations.⁹

In military-to-military assistance, the U.S. military helped to increase the professionalism of the Salvadoran military in the areas of force structure changes, tactical level training, helicopters, limited amphibious operations, night operations, and staff training for the Salvadoran service staffs.¹⁰

The U.S. persuaded the Salvadoran government to execute a “National Plan” that sought to force the FMLN and its supporters out of San Vicente, restore infrastructure, win support for the Salvadoran government through social and economic improvements, and to establish local security through civil-defense units.¹¹ The plan did not have significant Salvadoran military support, and was unlikely to succeed given the lack of trust in 1983 on the part of the population toward a government and military that had massacred tens of thousands of civilians between 1980 and 1982.

U.S. objectives remained unchanged in the latter half of the 1980s, but the Salvadoran government and military began to follow U.S. recommendations to conduct a more aggressive, small-unit war. This change coincided with a gradual loss of the FMLN’s popular support, which increased the likelihood of its success.

Qualitative “Order of Battle”

U.S. engagement in El Salvador spanned three U.S. presidencies and the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. From the beginning, U.S. policymakers and military advisers encouraged the Salvadoran military to keep the FMLN off balance while carrying out civic-action programs that would help win support for the Salvadoran government and military.¹² With the election of President Jose Napoleon Duarte in 1984, the Salvadoran military became more active against the FMLN, while the Salvadoran

⁹ Quoted in Cale, 15.

¹⁰ LTC R.T. Clark, “U.S. Military Strategy in El Salvador” *National War College* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1990).

¹¹ Byrne, 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

government gained domestic and international legitimacy. U.S. civil-military objectives were aided by a new set of reforms instituted by the Duarte government. The FMLN went on a final offensive in 1989, however, to prove that the Salvadoran government had not succeeded in stabilizing the conflict, and then pursued a strategy of negotiations from a more equal position.

Ends-Means Relationships

The United States both succeeded and failed in El Salvador. In the end, the long stalemate between the parties led the groups to negotiate a peace. Throughout the civil war, the U.S. government advised the Salvadoran military on how to keep the insurgency in check and gain the trust of the civilians. As expected, the election of reformer Duarte in 1984 laid the foundation for greater government legitimacy. By 1992, the Salvadoran military's human rights record had improved. The United Nations Truth Commission assisted in reconciling the warring sides. The United States could not convince the Salvadoran military to defeat the insurgency in the early years of the war, however, nor was the military quick to change its violent and repressive habits. One source points out that "85 percent of the 75,000 people killed in the Salvadoran civil war died at the hands of government forces or death squads."¹³ The cost in civilian blood was extraordinarily high, reflecting the hierarchy of U.S. objectives. American concerns for human rights were not insincere, but were regularly overtaken by the necessity of containing what was seen as communist influence in El Salvador.

Final Thoughts

In El Salvador 1980-1992, the U.S. military applied lessons learned from the counterinsurgency in Vietnam. The barrier to a successful civil-military campaign in the Salvadoran civil war lay in the Salvadoran government itself. The government had a history of abuse and repression which diminished the effectiveness of a hearts-and-minds campaign. The Carter and Reagan administrations deemed the conflict of sufficient importance to U.S. interests to intervene, but did not have the political flexibility to allow U.S. 'boots on the ground.' U.S. civil-military professionals were merely there in an advisory role. This forced the Salvadoran government and military to conduct the war largely on their own, which satisfied the post-Vietnam imperative of remaining detached from counterinsurgency operations while fighting communism in the Western hemisphere.

¹³ J. Garry Clifford, "Reagan, Ronald Wilson," *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations*, eds. Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, vol. 3 ((New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 458.

GRENADA

Description

On October 12, 1983, militant Marxists carried out a violent coup against the moderate Marxist government. The United States resolved to rescue six hundred American medical students, restore popular government, and deny Cuba greater involvement in Grenada. President Reagan sent 6000 troops to topple the Marxist regime and to send a strong signal to Cuba.¹⁴ Operation Urgent Fury began early in the morning on October 25. By the end of the day, despite significant errors, the United States had achieved the principal military objectives.¹⁵ After this swift military victory, the U.S. military turned its attention to civil-military operations to restore Grenadian infrastructure and morale. Within 2 months, all U.S. forces left the island.¹⁶

Key Actors

BLUE: Two US Army Ranger battalions, a brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division, a Marine Amphibious group, the USS Independence carrier group, and Special Operations Forces worked more or less together to rapidly overwhelm the Grenadian and Cuban opposition.¹⁷ Civil Affairs actors: 96th Civil Affairs Battalion and 358th Civil Affairs Brigade.

GREEN: The United States rescued Grenadian Governor-General Paul Scoon and chose him to replace murdered authoritarian leader Maurice Bishop, the ruling military council led by Hudson Austin, and other political factions. The neighboring island of Barbados provided the bases from which the United States mounted its invasion of Grenada.¹⁸

RED: U.S. opponents consisted of the Grenadian People's Revolutionary Army led by Hudson Austin, civilian coup leader Bernard Coard, and armed Cuban construction workers. There were also a limited number of Soviet and Soviet bloc advisors in country.

Objectives & End States

The principal U.S. objectives in Grenada were to prevent further communist expansion in America's neighborhood, in the form of a Soviet- and Cuban-sponsored airport in Grenada, to restore Grenada's constitutional government, which had been suspended by Marxist leader Bishop in 1979, and to rebuild Grenada's infrastructure to pre-Bishop levels. The other critical objective was to prevent another Iran hostage crisis, given the high numbers of American civilians in Grenada. In addition, President Reagan may have been motivated to show decisive force following the terrorist attack that took 241 U.S. lives in Beirut just two days prior to the invasion of Grenada.

¹⁴ Ibid., 458-459.

¹⁵ Ronald H. Cole, "Grenada, Panama, and Haiti: Joint operational reform," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Autumn98/Winter99, Issue 20, 57-64.

¹⁶ Clifford, 459.

¹⁷ Major Wayne Hicks, USA, "Operation 'Urgent Fury': Military Police (MP) In Grenada" GlobalSecurity.org (1989), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1989/YW.htm>.

¹⁸ Roderick A. McDonald, "Barbados," *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations*, eds. Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 134.

There was no Civil Affairs planning prior to the invasion of Grenada, but the Civil Affairs teams that were deployed improvised with reasonable success.¹⁹ As in other low-intensity conflict scenarios, the U.S. military's CA goal was to provide as secure an environment as possible for Grenadian civilians. Although the combat phase of Urgent Fury did not seriously damage Grenadian infrastructure, the U.S. military focused on rebuilding Grenadian infrastructure that had fallen into disrepair under the Bishop regime of 1979-1983.

Operational Strategies/Key Missions and Tasks

The first U.S. objectives were to neutralize Grenadian and Cuban resistance, hunt down military commander Hudson Austin and other coup leaders, and evacuate U.S. students. Planning for the operation had been conducted in haste, and overwhelming force was employed to help mitigate the lack of accurate intelligence on the island.²⁰

U.S. Civil Affairs personnel sought to help the Grenadians rehabilitate their own island, using homegrown resources and U.S. resources as needed. One analyst points out that CA personnel found that Grenadian officials and technicians were "able and hard-working," and that the CA teams tried to avoid imposing a foreign, top-down solution to the island's problems.²¹ Key Civil Affairs tasks in Grenada included caring for displaced persons, restoring communications systems, rehabilitating the school system, public utilities and public works, road repair, water and sewage disposal systems, and ensuring that key commercial sites opened for business.²²

Qualitative "Order of Battle"

U.S. combat operations in Grenada suffered from a lack of planning and inter-Service coordination. Marines, Rangers, paratroopers, and other components had different equipment, transportation, and close air support, creating problems in command, control, and communications.²³ U.S. gaffes during the invasion of Grenada are relatively well known, and provided some of the impetus for the Goldwater-Nichols reorganization of 1986.

As the U.S. Army's only active component CA unit at the time, the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion was sent to perform the civil-military mission in Grenada. One month after the U.S. engagement began, the reserve component 358th CA Brigade sent two three-man teams to assist the civil-military mission. The RC volunteers specialized in engineering and public administration and interfaced successfully with USAID personnel in country,

¹⁹ Stanley Sandler, *Glad to See Them Come and Sorry to See Them Go: A History of U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Military Government*, U.S. Army Special Operations Command History and Archives Division, 373-374.

²⁰ Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada 12 October – 2 November 1983*, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint History Office (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1997) 65-66.

²¹ Sandler, 374.

²² Ibid., 374-375.

²³ Cole, 67.

with the Grenadian government, and after a few misunderstandings, with the active component 96th CA Battalion.²⁴

Other special operations forces were deployed in Grenada to perform medical and police functions. Two weeks after the swift U.S. military victory, one element of the 16th Military Police (MP) Brigade (ABN) was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division operating in Grenada and was given full responsibility for Cuban and revolutionary Grenadian detainees, among other roles. On October 30-31, another element of the 16th MP Brigade (ABN) deployed to provide combat support such as enemy prisoner of war operations and law enforcement.²⁵ Despite the presence of other special operations troops, CA personnel took on a broad range of SOF responsibilities. By the end of 1983, all U.S. forces had left Grenada, their missions more or less complete.

Ends-Means Relationships

One expert implies that Civil Affairs ends and means were moderately to remarkably well synchronized in Grenada, thanks in large part to experienced CA teams that were given latitude to improvise within a clearly understood framework.²⁶

The CA mission was not accomplished flawlessly, however, and CA teams were called upon to resolve several unforeseen problems. One of these occurred when U.S. troops generated more garbage than the island could bear, prompting a rat infestation. Other unexpected operations included coordinating a coastal patrol, escorting President Reagan's special representative for disaster assistance, providing security for USAID personnel, and conducting a public information campaign.²⁷ CA capabilities and ingenuity appear to have adequately compensated for these challenges, however. U.S. CA personnel established a mutually beneficial relationship with USAID personnel: Civil Affairs reservists provided expertise and USAID provided funding.²⁸ The level of coordination between separate military units performing CA tasks and between military and civilian agencies was less than ideal.²⁹ The nontraditional responsibilities adopted by Civil Affairs personnel, and the at times disjointed execution of civil-military operations by CA and other SOF, point to the lack of advance CA planning and exercises for the invasion. This reflected the absence of advance joint planning and exercises, exacerbated by the sudden decision to invade and the need to rapidly secure U.S. persons.

Final Thoughts

Although it was seen by many as a breach of international law, the U.S. invasion of Grenada was a resounding success on many accounts. Despite imperfect execution of incomplete planning, the U.S. armed forces evacuated the students, captured the coup leaders, restored constitutional government, left Grenadian infrastructure better than they

²⁴ Sandler, 374.

²⁵ Major Wayne Hicks, USA, "Operation 'Urgent Fury': Military Police In Grenada," GlobalSecurity.org (1989).

²⁶ Sandler, 374.

²⁷ Ibid., 375.

²⁸ Ibid., 374.

²⁹ Ibid., 375.

found it, gained the gratitude of the Grenadian population, and ended the U.S. military occupation within two and a half months.

The CA mission in Grenada should serve both as an example of excellence and a cautionary tale. Civil Affairs personnel applied counterinsurgency lessons from Vietnam and other U.S. engagements informally rather than systematically. Careful in-theater CA planning, execution, and reaction compensated for the lack of pre-deployment civil-military planning. There was top-level reluctance after Vietnam to admit that stabilization and reconstruction would continue to be part of U.S. military engagements, which prevented sufficient resources and planning from providing for operations such as Grenada. CA and other SOF personnel in Grenada dealt reasonably well with unexpected challenges on the ground that better training and planning might have averted.

PANAMA

Description

During the 1980s, General Manuel Noriega consolidated his control over both the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and the Panamanian government. When Noriega lost the 1989 election, he annulled it and installed himself as head of government. Tensions with the United States were already mounting when PDF soldiers fatally shot Marine Lt. Robert Paz and beat and harassed a Navy lieutenant and his wife who had witnessed the shooting. Fearing further harm to U.S. lives and property, President George H.W. Bush ordered the invasion of Panama to protect U.S. interests and remove Noriega from power.

Key Actors

BLUE: U.S. operations in Panama were conducted from SOUTHCOM at Howard Air Force Base, Panama City, under the direction of General Maxwell Thurman. Key U.S. actors included several infantry divisions, Army Ranger battalions, the U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs Task Force (hybrid reserve component, active component, psychological operations, and other SOF); and Naval, Air Force, and Marine units.

GREEN: The United States oversaw the election of Panamanian President Guillermo Endara, who led the country beginning with only a small group of advisers.

RED: Principal U.S. adversaries were General Manuel Antonio Noriega and his Panamanian Defense Forces, including paramilitary troops.

Objectives & End States

President Bush's objectives in Panama were to protect U.S. lives and property, defend the Panama Canal, restore popular government in Panama, and bring Noriega to justice.³⁰

The U.S. leadership wanted to deal the PDF a near-fatal blow and then retrain and rebuild

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Panama," Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (September 2008), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2030.htm>.

it.³¹ The primary U.S. political goal was to assist the new Panamanian government in gaining democratic legitimacy.

Contingency planning had begun under SOUTHCOM commander General Frederick Woerner in 1987, and was known as PRAYER BOOK/BLUE SPOON. These plans were updated under the direction of President George H.W. Bush's SOUTHCOM commander, General Maxwell Thurman,³² and were renamed JUST CAUSE. General Thurman gave greater attention and emphasis to the kinetic aspects of the operation. He did not require the civil-military planners to update their plans rigorously to match new realities, such as the decision to increase the pace of combat operations to surprise Noriega. In the original CA plans, RC CA units were to be called up to provide a continuous, integrated mission. As the situation on the ground deteriorated and combat plans evolved, U.S. Army Reserve Special Operations Command solicited individual CA volunteers.³³

U.S. civil-military objectives were the responsibility of a joint Civil-Military Operations Task Force (CMOTF) in the SOUTHCOM J-5. Civil Affairs historian Stanley Sandler records five CMOTF missions: "1) To support U.S. military forces in establishing the law and order infrastructure, 2) To provide CA support to the new Panamanian government, 3) To manage a refugee camp, 4) To establish CMO support for the cities of Panama and 5) To assist in nation building programs."³⁴

Operational Strategies/Key Missions and Tasks

The military offensive in Panama was swiftly and brilliantly executed. The United States had several advantages: Panamanians were overwhelmingly pro-American; U.S. forces were highly trained and had a clear advantage in night warfare; U.S. weapons were more precise; Panamanian Defense Forces were too centralized and poorly trained to withstand a U.S. assault on multiple fronts; and since Panama City was literally SOUTHCOM's backyard, the U.S. military knew the territory exceptionally well. U.S. forces had even trained for certain contingencies on or near location.

The Task Force suffered from the erroneous assumption that there would be a functioning, adequately staffed Panamanian government, a scenario that the original civil-military planners knew was unlikely.³⁵ Still, CA and other civil-military units performed creditably. Civil Affairs personnel arrived with combat troops on December 20, 1989 and maintained a presence in Panama for much of 1990.³⁶ As part of the CMOTF, Civil Affairs personnel in Panama were expected to care for displaced persons, assist the new Panamanian government in governing, and restore critical public services

³¹ Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 398.

³² Donnelly et al., 18; 55.

³³ Sandler, 382.

³⁴ Ibid., 378.

³⁵ Ibid., 379.

³⁶ Edward F. Dandar, Jr., "Civil Affairs Operations," in Bruce W. Watson and Peter G. Tsouras, eds., *Operation Just Cause: The U.S. Intervention in Panama* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 127.

such as policing, utilities, health and sanitation. The Task Force developed nineteen major engineering projects and over 220 civic action projects nationwide.³⁷

Qualitative “Order of Battle”

Unlike in the invasion of Grenada, the U.S. Army organized Civil Affairs and other special forces activities in Panama centrally under the CMOTF. The Task Force headquarters was staffed with Reserve Component Civil Affairs volunteers, Psychological Operations units, 9 CA reservists already in country, and other special forces.³⁸ Civil Affairs personnel supported combat and other tactical operations, gradually handed over governance assistance to U.S. embassy personnel, and offered civil affairs assessments to USAID to help direct reconstruction funds.³⁹

CA units successfully carried out several missions despite imperfections in civil-military planning. U.S. forces, including CA troops, pursued several simultaneous objectives in the early hours of December 20. Two contingents of the 96th CA battalion accompanied the Rangers in securing the Torrijos-Tocumen airport, calming travelers, and rescuing hostages in the terminal. Other units were assigned to support Marine, infantry, and Air Force combat teams. One CA team accompanied a Ranger unit to assess civil affairs needs at a prison on Coiba island. Over the next weeks, others monitored commercial activities, provided medical services, restored electrical power, assisted with sanitation problems, delivered food, cared for displaced persons at Balboa High School, and performed other essential services.⁴⁰

Successful CA missions notwithstanding, there were not enough Civil Affairs units and Military Police to all civilians out of harm’s way and meet the population’s needs in the weeks and months following the initial U.S. offensive. The infantry (82nd Airborne and 7th Infantry Division-Light) carried some of the peacekeeping burden. For those combat troops who performed civil-military tasks, one source related, “virtually all of [the general purpose forces] wished for more guidance and training.” During the period of instability following the initial attack, U.S. soldiers found themselves in the midst of feuds and vendettas. Dealing with specific civilian issues such as arbitration was not part of general purpose forces (GPF) training.⁴¹ The long-standing dispute over whether to increase SOF numbers or increase stability operations training for GPF came into play again in Panama.

Ends-Means Relationships

Some faulted the U.S. military for not preventing several days of widespread looting after the initial assault. As combat troops chased down Noriega and the PDF, Military Police and Civil Affairs units were stretched thin.⁴² Planning for stability operations did occur, but General Thurman and planners at the XVIII Airborne Corps did not sufficiently

³⁷ Ibid., 132.

³⁸ Ibid., 127.

³⁹ Ibid., 128-129.

⁴⁰ Sandler, 379-381.

⁴¹ Donnelly et al., 409.

⁴² Ibid., 401.

update and exercise plans that would have provided a smoother transition to a functioning post-Noriega administration.⁴³ Planners under General Woerner had understood the need for a temporary military government to get the fledgling Endara government on its feet without major disruption in government services.

The smooth, continuous execution of civil-military operations in Panama suffered from the short rotations of reservist volunteers and USAID personnel. The Task Force reorganized to match changing skill sets, but transportation and logistical problems created occasional gaps in expertise. In February 1990, the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion returned to Fort Bragg, leaving CA reservists in charge of the Civil Affairs mission.⁴⁴ Shortfalls in U.S. civil-military capabilities consisted primarily of personnel issues (e.g., insufficient numbers, lack of uniformity in training) and unclear linkage between contingency plans for Panama and what unfolded on the ground.

Still, the United States met its primary objectives of bringing Noriega to justice, restoring a more legitimate Panamanian government, preventing hostile control of the Panama Canal, and most importantly, providing for the safety of nearly all U.S. civilians in Panama. Although undermanned, the CMOTF conducted many successful operations that improved the condition of Panamanian citizens.

Final Thoughts

One source points out that many of the U.S. advantages that made Operation Just Cause a success are not to be taken for granted.⁴⁵ The dictator's attempts to stir up anti-Americanism, for example, might be more successful in a different country under different circumstances. Although it had planned to retreat to the jungle and begin a guerilla war in the event of a U.S. attack, the PDF did not take advantage of opportunities to do so. This was in part the result of deliberate planning under General Thurman, who directed an increase in the pace of combat operations to preserve an element of surprise. The United States was also fortunate that very few U.S. lives were lost and operations jeopardized despite the confusion arising from delays in several deployments from the continental United States due to severe weather conditions.

A sign of the times, the resources and expertise applied to stability operations in Panama could not compare to the resources and expertise of general purpose forces conducting combat operations. Even though General Thurman and XVIII Airborne planners paid insufficient attention to the plans and exercises of their predecessors, they benefited from the sustained focus on stability operations and the contingency plans created at SOUTHCOM's Army component. As the Panamanian government expanded from two individuals into a collection of functioning ministries, U.S. civil-military operations were largely successful in restoring law and order and basic services. The CA mission in Panama improved on the CA mission in Grenada in the level of formal coordination between the Active and Reserve Components and among the special forces units in country.

⁴³ Sandler, 379.

⁴⁴ Dandar, 129-130.

⁴⁵ Donnelly et al., 401.